

Pretty Girl Look So Tough

thoughts on sexism. gender. beauty
standards.

& the politics and stereotypes
of the "femme" identity

Contents

INTRO

Page 1

SHAVING

Page 3

ANOREXIA

Page 6

FATPHOBIA

Page 9

INDOCTRINATION

Page 11

SHAME, STIGMA, & SEXUAL
ABUSE

Page 12

TOP OR BOTTOM?

Page 18

QUEER IDENTITY

Page 19

REIMAGINING FEMME

Page 22

OUTRO

Page 23

who
is



the femme?

Intro

This zine came about due to a lot of thoughts I've been having recently about the nature of being what is commonly described as "femme." I got the title from a Prince lyric because Prince is fucking awesome and also because it pretty adequately sums up the nature of what this zine means.

When I say that I'm a femme, this means specifically that I am part of feminist and queer communities (both of which have long struggled to present wimmin's identities as being more expansive and varied than what society's gendered norms allow), and that I have come to identify as a genderqueer anarchofeminist femme womyn (among many other things).

What does having a femme identity mean? It means that I often wear makeup and high heels; enjoy wearing skirts and dresses; have extensive collections of costume jewelry and perfumes; and I also have a notable passion for stockings. Of course, many people who do not self-identify as femme share these fashion preferences. So what else is being femme really about? Am I femme? If I'm not, who is? What does being femme mean, personally, politically, sexually, and otherwise?

Beyond my outward appearance and the way I dress, the definition of what it is to be femme becomes jumbled. To be femme often denotes, even more than a particular outward appearance, certain attitudes and behaviors. Sometimes people inaccurately attribute certain behaviors of mine to my identity.

People have associated many things with my being femme. Here are some examples:

- *Image-control behaviors such as materialism; pride; negative body image & eating disorders

- *Societal factors, including victimization; racial, ethnic, & cultural identity; class background; my experience as a survivor of abuse; speaking privilege issues such as being unassertive, shy, socially uneasy & soft-spoken

- *Emotional behaviors such as worry, concern, protectiveness & anxiety; neediness & codependency; and feelings of depression & helplessness

- *Sexual behaviors, including shame; sexual preferences; sluttiness; & sex positivity

- *Domestic behaviors such as generosity, kindness and hospitality

- *Work ethics and career choices, such as my perfectionism; my work in the sex industry; and my artistic ability

All of these things are part of my individual personality and experience, but what I am asking myself (and you) is how relevant each of these things are, and how any of them are directly related, to my

identity and experience as a femme.

To some people, my identity as a femme womyn means that I "willingly or knowingly" behave in certain ways that are part of society's unhealthy and oppressive structure of womynhood and/or femininity. To some it means that I "voluntarily" collude with modern beauty standards. To others it means that my appearance and demeanor is "deliberately" more palatable to "the masses" because a femme identity may seem closer to the gender identity of many mainstream wimmin. Often, because I am femme, my gender and/or sexual identity are assumed for me because I "look straight."

This zine will address many internal struggles that I have encountered in analyzing my attachment to traditional "feminine" ideals, and will delve into breaking down some behaviors associated with my femme identity.

Some writing contained within this zine may be triggering. Please be conscious of your emotional health as you read.

Shaving

I am sitting in the bathtub, sliding a razor named after the Greek goddess of love up and down my legs.

My relationship with shaving has been in development for as long as I can remember, but I can clearly remember my first memory associated with shaving. It was a summer afternoon, I was about nine years old, and I sat watching my mother shave her legs in a metal basin on the back porch of the big house at our hippie commune.

As my mother is actually fairly militant about not shaving, I was accustomed to my mom having hairy legs and armpits, and as far as I remember, all of the wimmin who lived on the commune (with the exception of my big sister, who is seven years my senior) were also unshaven.

My mother explained to me and to a couple of other wimmin gathered on the back porch that she had a special date. I remember wondering what it was about this date in particular that would warrant my mother shaving her legs. Since my parents' divorce a couple of years prior, my mom had dated a number of men, and I knew that she hadn't shaved her legs at any time during the course of her relationships with them. When I asked her why she was shaving her legs for this specific date, she didn't have an answer for me.

It turned out that she was going on a date with a guy who was somewhat "straighter" than some of the men she had dated in the past. I wonder now if my mom was conforming to internalized beauty standards in order to please a boyfriend who might not have approved of her personal choices; if she was shaving as a personal choice or for fun; or if it was a day regarded as a special occasion.

I'd like to be able to say that I shave for special occasions, but this isn't entirely true. Yes, I do shave for special occasions, but these "special occasions" are also highly dictated by circumstance. Its not like I shave for ceremonial or ritual purposes exactly, although sometimes that's involved too. I guess its complicated.

Most of the time the special occasions that I'm talking about are situations where:

- a) I would be embarrassed by the presence of my leg hair
- b) I want to impress or seduce a lover
- c) I want to make a good impression on a potential employer or the general public

The question is, why don't I believe that I can be

appealing in a professional or sexual way with hairy legs and armpits?

With my lover Ren, I know that he doesn't mind body hair. I shave my armpits and pubic hair infrequently, but I maintain a pretty regular schedule of shaving my legs. While I know that my routine is nothing compared to what many wimmin dictate for themselves, I usually shave my legs at least twice a month, to prevent my hair from getting "too long."

Also, when I know that Ren and I will probably spend the evening making love, or if it is one of those infamous "special occasions" like an anniversary or a birthday, I will shave "for him." Even if I correct myself immediately after thinking that I am shaving for his enjoyment, I can't shake the nagging feeling that I'm not doing it for myself, I'm doing it for my lover.

And what's wrong with shaving for your lover's pleasure, exactly? In a utopian world, I don't think I personally could find anything wrong with it, but in the society we exist in today, I feel like conforming to the beauty standards set in place by oppressive and sexist systems can be dangerous and harmful to one's sense of self-worth.

For one thing, Ren is male-identified. This makes the dynamic of my wanting to alter my natural body in order to please him even more complex than it has been for me when I have been in relationships with female-identified folks. The potentially submissive, misogynistic, and sexist undercurrents of such thought processes about my body image disturb me. As a radical feminist, I feel that I am constantly learning new things about struggle, and it is important to remind myself to confront the ways in which I am oppressed and marginalized: in this case, I am clearly "buying into" mainstream ideals of feminine beauty and sexiness.

If I program myself into a mindset that says I should shave before "special occasion sex," will I then be unable to fully enjoy special nights of making love if I forget, don't want, or convince myself not to shave? If this is the case, should I then wean myself away from the habitual process of altering my body to appeal to others and engage in healthier ways of nurturing my body image and self esteem?

On the other hand, should I deny myself physical experiences that I enjoy and find erotic (i.e., the feeling of a my sleek legs sliding along a lover's body, oral sex when I've shaved my cunt, or the graceful curved shape of my shaved armpit) in favor of radical acceptance of my natural body?

At this point, I know that the issue of shaving is complex and multilayered for me. Sometimes I shave purely because I feel like it. I want to take a long bath, relax, shave as a process of catharsis and regeneration, and spend some time alone, reading or writing, putting lotion or oil on my legs, and generally

pampering myself.

But I also often find myself feeling ashamed to wear skirts without tights or high socks when I haven't shaved in awhile.

When I'm at work wearing anything sleeveless, I keep my arms pinned to my sides in an effort to hide my hairy armpits from management and coworkers. I don't want to shave my armpits: generally I like the aesthetic of armpit hair, and I find shaving armpits to be extremely uncomfortable and generally a hassle. Despite these strong feelings, I still feel the urge to hide my body hair from people who might be offended by it. The very idea that I might be offending people with the natural appearance of my body appalls me, and I am especially disturbed by the notion that I continue to feel shame surrounding it.

Anorexia

I took Ren to see the creepy fish movie, you know, Finding Nemo. We were at the Gateway mall trying to kill time, buying candy and making out in an effort to scare the squares with our full-fledged freak love, when I spotted the scale.

It promised my exact weight, a daily horoscope, and my lucky lotto numbers for just a quarter. I begged one off of Ren and then hopped on the scale, deposited the coin, and waited for the results.

The second the machine started calculating, I regretted my decision. I stood there sucking a mouthful of candy, popping my knuckles nervously. Ren watched me casually from a few feet away. I realized, in those few seconds, that I had no idea what I actually weigh.

There was a time in my early adolescence when I was obsessed with pursuing a career in modeling and/or film acting. I was naturally pretty and talented, and I enjoyed theater and liked attention. I got an agent, had a few head shots taken, and before long, I had secured a couple of fashion shoots, educational video spots, and commercials. In no time, I was hooked.

I wanted to be a cologne model, a designer girl, draped in Gucci or Valentino, a movie star with a life full of acclaim and high drama. I hung pictures of models and actresses that I admired on my bedroom walls and compared myself to them. What would it really take to achieve my goals? Good makeup, obviously. An agent. Talent. But above all, I realized that all of the models had one thing in common: an uncompromising low weight. I did some research on some of my model's stats to set what I felt were realistic goals, and soon decided that I would be happy if I could get down to 106.

I was already skinny and tall - I've been just over five feet eight inches since I was about fourteen, and when I first became interested in modeling and acting I weighed about one hundred and twenty-five pounds. I quickly became anorexic and dropped rapidly to around one fifteen.

I knew that no one I knew have tolerated what I was doing - and I even knew what it was, knew what I was doing to myself, was fully conscious of every meal I skipped. I knew that I had an eating disorder, and I even wrote in my journal that I was "voluntarily anorexic." I knew the effect my eating disorder was having on my health, my energy, my body, but I didn't care. I just wanted to be thin, and I was becoming addicted to the feeling of being able to

control myself. In a time in my life when I had very little control of factors that affected my emotional and mental health, controlling my eating habits became the next best thing. I liked the process of denying myself food when I had made mistakes and rewarding myself with nourishment when I had done something right or completed an important task.

To avoid criticism from my mother or my conscientious friends, I would tell my friends that I had eaten dinner at my family's house, and I would alternately tell my family that I had eaten dinner at my friends' houses. Even though I was visibly diminishing, I got away with it. No one noticed as my petite-sized clothes became looser and my cheekbones sank. I was completely flat-chested and sallow-faced, and my eyes were ringed with dark circles from lack of nutrition and exercise. For awhile I felt triumphant, glad I had gotten away with my scheme. Then I began to feel abandoned.

This happened around the time that I realized I could no longer eat. I remember several occasions when I would decide to reward myself for something I had done correctly with a slice of pizza or a bit of ice cream - only to find that I was physically incapable of eating. The food wouldn't go down my throat. I could barely even chew it. My negative body image had worked itself to such a fever pitch that I now associated the act of eating with pure ugliness. I felt an unbearable sense of worthlessness and disgust when I sat myself down before a plate of food, and no matter how much I desired the taste, the feeling of food in my stomach, I couldn't force my body to do something that it had grown completely adverse to doing.

This was when I began to blame people in my life for my anorexia: how could they not have noticed me wasting away? How could they not have cared enough to say anything when there was still time? Didn't anyone love me?

My agent was the only one who said anything. She told me that I looked beautiful, perfect, that I was guaranteed a breakthrough any day, that there were all sorts of high-profile people perusing my head shots, that everyone was interested in seeing me. But I never got any calls. I don't know if it was because I had a bad, lying, vicious agent (true) or because I looked so frail and skeletal (also true). I looked extremely ill, malnourished, and deeply sad.

It was a strange place to be in: I despised myself for being unable to eat, for relinquishing the mental control I'd had over my own body, and I hated anorexia as a concept because it went against so much that I believed in. But I also didn't want to give up my thinness. The grotesque state of my unhealthy body fascinated me. I secretly wondered how thin I could get, how little nourishment I could actually survive on.

Gradually, I began to eat again as I worked through some other issues of control and shame, but it was a

long time before I reached anything resembling a healthy body weight. I had to do a lot of in-depth work and difficult processing to get to the point where I enjoyed food again. I don't remember much of it because it was so traumatic for me.

Now, as it turns out, I'm 165 - which is not at all what I expected. I have no realistic concept of my weight because anorexia still affects and tempts me. On days when I recognize it for what it is, I feel that I still suffer from that disease, and I imagine that I must be wasting away. On days when I succumb to fatphobic standards of beauty, I feel that I must be at least eighty pounds overweight. 165 is actually right in the middle of these two extremes. It was scary, but I'm glad I spent the quarter on the scale at the mall. This is information I need for my own healing process.

Fatphobia

I am a healthy, beautiful womyn. I am a healthy, beautiful womyn. I am a healthy, beautiful womyn. This is a mantra I repeat to myself often. Its a reminder, a talisman that I use to do battle with sizeist standards of beauty and femininity.

I feel like I have so much internalized fatphobia that sometimes I wonder if I will ever escape it. But when I talk about it with friends I find that I probably have just about as much as any other womyn I know. We all got it from a lot of the same sources: friends, advertising, movies, mom.

Trying to confront my own internalized fatphobia while healing from anorexia has been a harrowing experience. I have realized so much shit recently as I've been attempting to decode all these fucked up memories, messages and mantras that float around in my subconscious.

For awhile, I got really interested in fat wimmin's activism. I was all about it: the ideas of embracing your body for what it is, confronting fatphobia and sizeism, breaking down stereotypes, getting to know other fat wimmin...and then I realized, I'm NOT fat. I'm not thin, either, but I'll get to that in a moment.

I have a distorted image of my body because of years spent obsessing over starvation imagery. Somehow I feel that the images of stick-thin wimmin that have been branded into my mind are the average, or the norm. Subconsciously, I have made these images of emaciated wimmin seem normal, probably so that they would be more palatable to me in my uncharacteristic pursuit of thinness. Knowing that I am sixty pounds heavier than the average supermodel makes me feel fat. I know this reality makes a lot of wimmin feel fat or inadequate, because models are presented in our society as the ideal, but for me, they have melded with my concept of what is normal for wimmin's bodies to look like. Therefore, I have a lot of fatphobic responses to my own body, when I am in all actuality, only a bit fatter than average.

It took some investigation before I realized that I wasn't fat. I looked at some fat-positive zines and websites, checked out a fat wimmin's burlesque troupe because I have a strong interest in burlesque. The wimmin looked beautiful to me, and I felt so inspired. Then I realized that most of these wimmin are over two hundred pounds. I don't even come close to that.

I eventually had to check myself and correct a lot of things I'd said to other folks about identifying as fat.

I feel that if I don't confront my own warped body image and instead try to seek radical acceptance of my supposedly "fat" body, I will be appropriating and usurping the radical alliances of fat wimmin who are genuinely fat and who actually face sizeism and fatphobia in our society.

Now, I'm focusing not only on deconstructing my own sizeist thought patterns, but also on being an ally to fat folks and fat liberation movements. And I'm working really hard on accepting and loving my own body as it is.

Something that has been helpful for me to immediately confront and dissect any fatphobic thoughts I have about myself. For example, one common worry I have is that I'll get gradually fatter and have less and less energy. I call myself out on falling into a bullshit stereotype that fat equates to lazy or unhealthy. I remind myself that generally, my loss of energy has to do with my depression and mental health issues, as well as my insomnia, and that it is those causes that I have to focus on in order to make myself feel better.

It has also helped me a lot in this recent process of self-acceptance to remind myself how much I genuinely respect and cherish the diversity of my friends' body sizes and shapes. I try to remind myself that if I can offer this kind of care, love and acceptance to people in my community, there's no reason why I can't overcome my own oppressive thought processes to offer it to myself as well.

Indoctrination

One thing I worry about is explaining my beautification rituals to kids - not only the ones that I may hypothetically raise in the future but also any other kids in my community.

I have deep political opposition to oppressive beauty standards set in place for wimmin in our society, but I also acknowledge (and am working on accepting) that I really and truly enjoy partaking in some of them.

Being a typical high femme, I believe nothing can perk up my day quite like a bit of sassy black eyeliner or a good red lipstick. Shaving, as I've already discussed, is something that sometimes feels cleansing and cathartic for me. Applying moisturizing lotions, oils, and sweet-scented perfumes is an important part of making myself feel healthy, sacred, confident and beautiful.

But on occasions when kids in my community (like my six-year-old sister, for example) have asked why I am putting on makeup, high heels or stockings, I haven't been able to provide an answer that satisfies me. It might satisfy kids when I say something like, "Because it makes me feel pretty," but that kind of mindset scares me. I don't want to tell any kid that wimmin are only capable of being successful or attractive when they are wearing makeup, dresses, earrings, or anything else for that matter.

I don't like the idea that I may be helping to indoctrinate kids into a devastating culture in which negative self-image is a reality for all of us. I don't want to be teaching lessons I don't agree with.

I think I have a huge responsibility to fully explain the thought processes behind all of my choices about makeup and general appearance to kids, and I think we should all give a lot of thought to what we might be teaching kids in our casual responses and off-the-cuff explanations.

Shame, Stigma & Sexual Abuse

During the time that I struggled with anorexia, my depression, anxiety, and mental health issues really came to the surface as well.

I was dealing with a lot of complicated issues that had come up for me while recovering lost and deliberately hidden memories of childhood sexual abuse. I was suddenly overwhelmed with shame and apprehension, and I couldn't bring myself to really tell anyone. I felt totally alone, and I didn't really know what to do.

I was also beginning to delve into the concept of pursuing sexual relationships with men, something that, frankly, scared the shit out of me. I had been with wimmin off and on since I was young, but overwhelming heterosexism, curiosity, and plain old boy crazed lust drove me to find out what all the fuss was about the boy gender.

I found that my thinness, coupled with my status as a local model and actress, attracted the attention of a group of rich boys who went to the high school that my few friends attended. They were only fifteen and sixteen, but had expensive cars, cell phones, and pagers. I had very few friends, since I was depressed and not in the public school system, so I was excited to get to know them.

They soon adopted me as their "mascot," and spent the next few months taking turns trying to get me in bed. Turns out they even had a running bet going for who could "pop my cherry," unbeknownst to me.

Even though I felt that these boys often mistreated me or behaved in ways that made me uncomfortable, I relished the attention. Because of class dynamics, patriarchy, a recent and very traumatizing relationship with a boy who was a longtime friend and heroin addict, and my own submissive behaviors that I had learned as a means to survive sexual abuse, the power inequities in my relationships with these "friends" were extremely visible. I didn't yet have the feminist education or vocabulary to properly analyze what was happening in these interactions, all I knew was that when I had become skinny, boys had expressed interest in me - I had never been at all popular before, and was actually considered to be extremely weird. Now, none of these boys who were "my friends" even attempted to engage me in conversation, they just told me that they'd do the talking and strode around school dances with me dangling from their arm like a

trophy. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew all of this was deeply, deeply fucked up, but I craved the attention and friendship so much that I pushed my feelings of discomfort and anger away.

When the four boys realized I wasn't going to put out, they ditched me one by one. To be honest, I was so disassociated during that time period that I really don't remember how I felt about it. I imagine I must have been devastated. I do remember them twisting things around and telling me that they couldn't be friends with me because I led them on, because I was a cocktease, and because I flirted with other people too much in front of them, and it hurt them deeply that I would be so slutty.

At the time, I felt unbelievable guilt at their misogynistic accusations. I hadn't intended to flirt with anyone, and I was confused as hell about what they were telling me about my behavior. I felt that I was pretty shy and inept, and I didn't have much confidence when it came to asking boys out or making the first move. I had all but abandoned liking wimmin because one of the boys had informed me that while "bisexuals" were "hot," I should probably keep it to myself and save my interest in girls for a time when I could use it to surprise a lucky boyfriend.

I was extremely susceptible to believing the things they were telling me because of some damaging things that had been said to me by sexual abusers, and also because since the faintest onset of puberty, my mother had been projecting her own shame upon me whenever she got angry, and some of her favorite new insults to throw at me were whore, slut and tramp. I felt, somehow, that my beauty was a curse. I was aware that I was thin and considered pretty, but I also knew that no one expressed an interest in anything I had to say, and it seemed like every time I talked to anyone, it was assumed that I was flirting. I became afraid to initiate conversations with boys because I didn't want them to feel led on by me, and I was afraid of talking to girls because I was afraid they had heard about my terrible reputation as a slut and a tease.

I spent a long time feeling plagued by their words and by memories of my abuse. As I uncovered more repressed memories, my anxiety and depression got worse. I began having panic attacks, though at the time I didn't know what they were. I would become overwhelmed with dizziness, fatigue, the feeling that I couldn't breathe. I would insult myself in my journal or under my breath, telling myself how useless, worthless, lazy, ugly and dishonest I was. I repeated words that my mother and the men who sexually abused me had said to me. I repeated them over and over again until I believed them. Then I would cry and eventually fall asleep.

After several years of trying to deal with the memories of abuse, it became too much for me. I was fixated on several memories, and had stopped the flood of others that wanted to pour into my conscious

mind. I started trying to heal, at first on my own. I told my story at a website that had been established to support abuse survivors. I learned to call myself a survivor instead of a victim. I stubbornly faced the few memories that I had a conscious grip on (the least frightening images and moments from certain occasions) until I felt that I had completely come to grips with everything that had happened.

But still, every time I even came close to making out with a boy, I would panic. The first time I really told a real, live, visible human my story, it was to a twenty-year-old man in Atlanta, Georgia, when I was fifteen.

I was traveling, recuperating from my most horrendous period of not eating, and I thought I could trust the person I was with. I was staying with my stepfather's brother and his family, and this person was my stepfather's brother's wife's son from a previous marriage, so not really my cousin, but sort of. He and I hit it off immediately. He was engaged to a womyn whom I had briefly met, and there were five years between us, so I naively assumed that our relationship had a sort of archetypal little sister relating to big brother quality.

We snuck out of his suburban house late one night to dance in the rain and afterwards he took me to a nearby playground. Somehow, my story came tumbling out. I couldn't say much, but I expressed the confusion and terror that I felt during my awkward first attempts at hooking up with boys. He gave me a hug (without asking) and I felt nervous but okay with it, as I thought he was trying to comfort me. Then he began kissing my neck and he moved to kissing my lips. I became uncomfortable and tried to break away by giggling and saying I wanted to swing on the swings. For awhile, things were okay again, but when we got back to his house, he continued his persistence.

We went up to his bedroom to listen to music and talk. It was late by this time, maybe around two or three in the morning. I had changed out of my rain-soaked clothes into pajamas, and I was wearing a green t-shirt and sweatpants. He started complimenting me, telling me how pretty I was. He told me he thought I was too skinny, and I awkwardly replied that I was working on it. Then he began kissing me again, and I didn't know how to end it. I didn't kiss back, but he didn't stop. Finally I said I was tired, and he pleaded, "Just a few more minutes," pushed me back onto his bed and removed my t-shirt. I wasn't wearing a bra, and I had never been topless like this with a boy before. I was terrified, and ashamed of my breasts, which I covered hurriedly with both of my hands. He told me I didn't have to be shy and started trying to wrench my hands away from my chest. I panicked and started to cry, and told him I really needed to put my shirt back on. He seemed frustrated, but he gave my shirt back and I quickly put it on.

I couldn't breathe, and I just kept staring at his

walls. He started telling me about how great having sex with his fiancée was, and how I was so sexy he couldn't believe I was still a virgin. He pointed out a bunch of notches carved into his headboard and brought out a knife. He told me that he carved a notch in the bed for every time he had sex with his fiancée. He asked if I wanted to see his weapons collection, and started laughingly telling me about his skills in martial arts and how he could snap me like a twig if he felt like it. Finally, barely breathing, I said that I was tired and had to get up early and I escaped his room. I vaguely remember going into the bathroom, locking the door, and vomiting, but after that, I don't remember anything else.

A couple of months later, when I had returned from traveling, my mom caught me on the phone with the rape crisis center in the middle of the night. She demanded to know why I was calling a rape crisis line, and I was forced to tell her that I'd been abused as a child. At first I was relieved, and felt that maybe she would know how to help, but she minimized the abuse by saying that it wasn't important and that there were many wonderful things in my life that I could focus on as an alternative to getting bogged down in my experience as an abuse survivor.

Try as I might, I couldn't rid myself of the memories, and they only intensified, especially when I continued my attempts at sexuality with men. Worse yet, situations like the one that had happened in Atlanta continued to occur. I would meet boys, have a platonic or mild crush attraction to them, divulge some of my abuse history, and they would attempt sexual contact with me. I didn't get any more confident about rejecting them, and all these experiences did for me was drive home the idea that my abuse experiences were erotic and made men want me.

Later, this became confusing to me, and I would seek out comfort and support for abuse memories and triggers from men who I wanted to be in relationships with. Often, talking about being molested was a key point in hooking up with someone. More sensitive men who had some knowledge of appropriate support techniques would respond with confusion and dismay when I attempted to kiss them after talking about intense memories of abuse, but a lot of men took advantage of my state of compulsive victimization.

Somehow I deduced that the ideal situation would be if I could tell a man about my abuse history, he would comfort me, kiss me gently, and take me sexually. I didn't expect panic, shame or insecurity to enter the picture, but as soon as I laid down next to anyone to take our kissing to the next level, I would panic. On rare occasions my partners noticed my stiffened body and shallow breathing and stopped to ask me what was wrong, at which point I would compulsively talk about the abuse and that would usually end our sexual relationship because we would both come to an unspoken agreement that I wasn't ready. But most of the time they wouldn't

notice, would disregard my signals, or would take advantage of my vulnerability to further their own sexual agenda. This bred fear and distrust, alongside the panic, fear and anxiety I was already feeling because of flashbacks and repressed memories.

My unhealthy patterns continued until at seventeen I got together with someone who had been a good friend for a long time. I was seventeen, and the farthest I had gone with a man was removing my shirt and having him kiss my breasts. On top of all the confusing sexual patterns I had developed and the upsetting and unresolved abuse responses, I was also feeling ashamed and inadequate because of my lack of sexual experience.

Ben and I got together under the pretense that we would be casual make-out partners, but he soon became very controlling. This was a relationship that I didn't quite understand. I wasn't very attracted to him, but I felt that we had established some trust as friends, and I was interested in pursuing sexual knowledge - and he had volunteered as a willing participant. I had already told him that I'd been abused, but it was in an offhanded way several months prior.

One night, we were kissing on my bed and I started to panic. I had decided that I was going to make an effort to actually work through my abuse memories, to process them, to heal my broken sexuality. I knew, instinctively, that this was the only way things would ever work out. I stopped him and told him that I tended to get scared while making out because of abuse memories. He asked me for some detail, and because I was already disassociated, I told him more than I had told anyone except the anonymous support base I found on the Internet.

Ben responded to my disclosure of abuse with an all-too-familiar reaction: he found it erotic and asked me if I would give him a blow job.

For the first time ever, I became angry. I demanded to know why he wasn't offering me support. I told him that if we were to have a successful relationship, I needed him to help create a safe space surrounding sexuality. At first, it worked and he apologized.

But our relationship became more and more abusive, with him constantly overstepping boundaries and pressuring me to do things I didn't feel comfortable doing it. In the past I had blamed myself for scary sexual situations because I knew I hadn't been assertive about desires, boundaries or what I needed to feel safe. Now that I was being assertive and my requests were not being honored, I shut down completely. It was like being molested all over again.

Most of the times after we made out I would have to run to the bathroom to throw up, then I would lock the door and stay there, staring at the wall. Ben would knock on the door and tell me to let him in, but I barely even heard him, even the times he was yelling at me.

I didn't understand what was happening. I was numb and felt dead inside, but when he initiated making out with me, I couldn't even ask him to stop anymore because he had proven by repeatedly violating my boundaries that he didn't care.

I isolated myself from my friends because I suddenly felt that I couldn't trust anyone and that no one actually cared for me. I began examining everything. I felt like nothing was real. After so many years of being submissive and knowing somewhere inside that I needed to find some self-confidence - now I had finally found my voice and it had done me no good.

Ben saw that my alienation worked to his advantage and encouraged me not to hang out with any of my friends, saying he didn't think they were good for me and he didn't know if our connections were real or worthwhile.

I never called him on the phone, but he would always show up at my house, like clockwork, and I never told him to leave. During the entire course of our relationship, he never once asked if things were okay, even though he knew fully that everything we were doing was unexplored territory for me.

Our "relationship" was a series of sexual violations, most of which I have blocked out of my memory. It ended me when he raped me and left a few days later to return to college in New York.

I still have so many issues around this. It is five in the morning, I have been working on writing this all night long, and I am wide awake.

Before I was raped by him, I felt that I had hope, drive, inspiration and spirit. Now, as much as I try to get back to that point, I feel all too often that I am empty inside, like I have no desire or interest in anything that I once found enthralling.

I became sexually compulsive after being raped, and I would say yes to people because I didn't feel like there was ever a place for me to say no.

I am just now finally beginning to learn about my own desires - I am teaching myself to recognize the difference between occasions when I actually earnestly want sex and occasions when I feel inexplicably obligated or expected to have sex. I value my assertiveness, and I am rediscovering my own boundaries and slowly, with love and support, finding a way to establish a healthy, sacred and loving sense of sexuality.

Top or Bottom?

I am what some folks like to call a switch. This means that I am both a "bottom" (more submissive or traditionally feminine lover) and a "top" (more aggressive or traditionally masculine lover).

I enjoy being ravished, but I like a healthy dose of being the one to do the ravishing as well. Depending on my mood, I like to be seduced or I like to perform a little seduction. I like to put the moves on, but I'm not adverse to having some moves put on me.

Most of the time, this feels natural and fun (especially because Ren is a genderqueer switch too, so it works out well for us to alternate roles). But sometimes, I have some issues.

I have been working on analyzing my sexuality in terms of how I have been affected by rape and abuse, and a lot of what I've been thinking is that sometimes, when I'm having an especially triggering day and then I try to have sex even though I'm not feeling the greatest, my manifestations of top or bottom have some icky undertones.

When I've had a bad day and I'm feeling topky, I worry that there's a lot of rage involved and a burning desire to reclaim some of my sexual control. When I've had a bad day and I'm feeling more like a bottom, I get really upset thinking about the dynamics of oppression and domination that have been so prevalent in my experience as a survivor.

I don't, however, want to refrain from sex on days when I've gotten triggered, because if I did that, at this point, I would never get any. I live my life as a survivor of rape and abuse, and I'm trying to work through it, not ignore it. So I'm focusing on an analysis of my sexual behaviors and preferences, so I can try to affect positive and healthy change in my attitudes toward sex so that I don't have to feel so traumatized about it. Eventually I know I'll get to the bottom (or perhaps to the top) of all this.

Queen Identity

I'm queer. There you have it. I am a femmey, femmey genderqueer dyke who digs more genders than just girls. True, I do like girls a lot; I like being a girl and I like being with other girls: I wear dresses and I dig pussy. I like leg warmers, lipstick and ladies.

In lots of ways, I have always been a fabulous little femme lesbian at heart, from the time when I tried to give a beautiful chestnut-haired neighbor an antique faux emerald necklace that actually belonged to mom (I was six, what can I say?) to my most recent relationship with a womyn wear we liked nothing better than to swap shades of lipstick and trade eyeshadow tips in between heated bouts of passionate kissing.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way I developed the notion that I wasn't allowed to be both feminine and queer, and certainly not feminine and genderqueer - God/dess forbid!

The idea that "girly girls" didn't like other "girly girls" was horrendously confusing, seeing as I was just as interested in chasing skirts as I was in hemming them with fancy lace and frills.

I got the uncomfortable feeling that there was no place in the world for a young femmey tomboy mostly-girl who liked (among lots of other genders) girlwimmin with homemade tattoos, retro evening gowns, crooked teeth and DIY haircuts.

And I must confess, that feeling is pervasive, and has stuck with even after some of the horrifying alienation and awkwardness of adolescence has subsided.

I still feel that in a lot of dyke communities, I'm not really welcome unless I can somehow prove myself as a "real lesbian." Maybe everyone feels like this, but I can't help but feel that my so-called bisexuality and my random hatred of the Indigo Girls helps fuel sentiments that I might be an impostor.

I know that a lot of queers (er, all of us, really) have been wronged by straight folks, but the thing is, I'm not straight! I'm queer as hell. I like girls, boys and all sorts of other folks too. I am a girl, a boy, and lots of other interesting genders, sometimes one at a time and sometimes all at once in a dramatic medley of know-it-all encyclopedic trivia, knife-wielding toughness, army boots, feather boas and fake eyelashes.

I wish that queer communities could be a bit more open to genderqueer folks like me who tend to dig on

all sorts of genders (including my own).

For a long time I felt alienated and excluded, and I also felt a lot of pressure (coming from my own internalized queerphobia and from people in my community) to choose: either butch or femme.

The butches got to me first. I was told that I'd be cuter if I butched up, that wimmin would recognize that I was queer and I'd get more sex, and that I "seemed more like a butch than a femme anyway."

So for awhile I went for it, and sometimes it felt great. There's definitely a butch, tough, burly, boyish side to me. I had a shaved head and I wore discarded army gear an awful lot of the time. I also smoked unfiltered cigarettes, spit a lot, and professed an interest in learning a little something about car engines. And for awhile, I felt comfortable with this newfound and concrete gender identity. I was having a great time, but secretly, I longed to mix up this butchness with a healthy dose of my glitter pens, lip gloss and silk pajamas.

My butch pals kept encouraging me, and I was almost convinced - there was, after all, a time when I had identified as a boy for a year or so. A couple of the butch folks who were encouraging me told me that I had probably started to come out as a boydyke, gotten traumatized by some transphobic occasion I couldn't remember, and had gone into repression, hiding beneath layers of confusion of gendered clothing items: army pants, camisoles, leather jackets, crinolines, hair gel and ribbons.

And I almost convinced myself that I was a total, full-on, no holds barred butch to the core, but then the yearning to wear perfume became too much and I realized that I just wasn't cut out to be a full-time butch.

Now you would think that by that time I would understand that I'm just one hell of a gender rebel. But of course, I had to try out the polarity, and for awhile there I thought I could be a full-time femme instead. I was decked out in high femme gear every day of the week, wearing at least an ounce of eyeliner one each eye, an abundance of pink, and an ungoddlessly amount of rhinestones that probably could have caused some serious eye injury if you caught me in the wrong light. But I wasn't at ease this way either.

Femmes told me I was in butch recovery, and they reprimanded me for speaking in a voice that was too deep or harsh. I was scorned for wearing jeans, told that I was sloppy, or "letting myself go" if I spent less than half an hour on my hair.

When I started to speak to anyone who seemed vaguely dykey I would get all confused and try to butch up and be femmey at once, which works when I'm just going with it and it is an *au naturel* part of my mixed-up gender identity, but it seemed to cause a lot of strife when I was trying to stifle the butch

part to let my femme self shine, or the other way around.

But suddenly one day when I had an uncontrollable desire to wear high heels with men's trousers, lipstick and a butch muscle t-shirt, I realized once and for all that I'm not comfortable being a full-time anything, which is why I'm devoted to giving myself space to allow for my gender to be fluid and mutable.

Recently, I have identified mostly as a femme with some butch touches thrown in on occasion. Whatever my gender identity happens to be, I have to admit I usually feel pretty satisfied, but it has taken me a long time to accept myself, and I think it might take the rest of my community a little longer yet.

Reimagining Femme

This is a call to all fierce, tough, in-your-face femmes out there, my kindred spirits. Let's break down these notions of femme identity denoting weakness, vulnerability, inability and a need to be protected or defended!

I want to see:

- *Elastic-top stockings that have been altered to hold a knife, so we can rest assured that glamor and defending oneself go hand-in-hand.

- *Tough broads wearing secondhand prom dresses and DIY tiaras feeling free to wander the streets all night in packs, reenacting all those unsafe and scary school dances where the prevailing idea was that we had to be walked right to the front door afterwards.

- *Folks recognizing the totally tough and utilitarian benefits of skirts: you can covertly take a piss, make a temporary pocket to carry stuff in, and look pretty while you're at it.

- *Wimmin learning to use high heels as weapons. My mom always called them rape shoes because you couldn't run in them. But what if we didn't run...?

- *People acknowledging those who look femme as being intelligent, valuable individuals, not just sexual playthings.

- *Girls all dressed in white, with long flowing hair and pink lipstick cursing as much as they fucking want to, spitting and farting in public.

- *All the ways in which we femmes are tough and proud and scarred and strong, expressed in a way that is loud and true, so we won't be dismissed or shoved aside anymore as wimmin who aren't "real feminists."

Ideas? Thoughts? Inspiration? Go for it!

Outro

This zine was put together over a two-day period on July 30th and 31st of 2003.

I haven't covered everything I hoped to cover in this zine, but there are just so many complex experiences layered one on top of the next, and sometimes they are impossible to separate - even when I can separate them, it is sometimes impossible to find the words to express what I'm in the process of mentally scrutinizing.

I hope you enjoyed Pretty Girl Look So Tough, and I hope that it encourages you to think about and confront your ideas regarding gender, sexism, genderqueer issues and misconceptions or stereotypes about people who identify as femme.

I would love feedback (including constructive criticism) on this project, as it has been an intensely personal and cathartic process of unearthing some things I haven't thought about in awhile, as well as a deep analysis of societal truths. Also, I want to hear your answers to the question: what is the femme identity?

If you are interested in distroing this zine or asking me to donate a few copies for a library or research project, contact me and we'll discuss rates and whatnot.

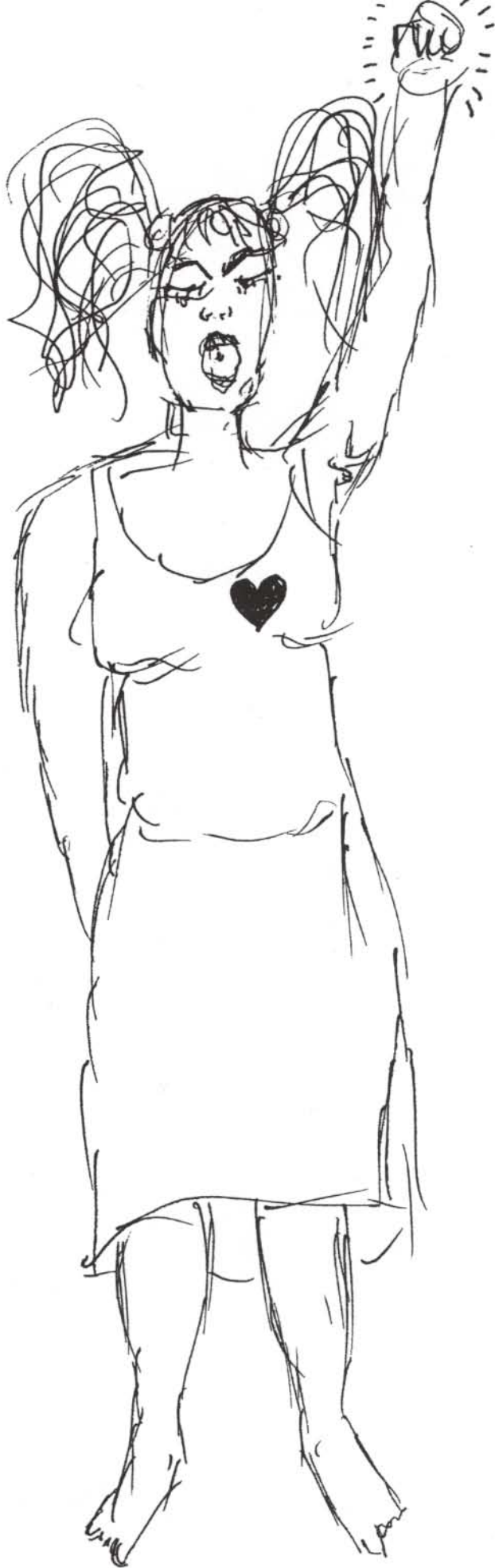
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In solidarity,

Olivia.



made with love, hope,
& in solidarity



keep fighting.